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Preserve Oswegatchie Hills-Land purchase on Niantic River a hopeful sign in efforts to save a unique asset.

The report that a non-profit group plans to buy 65 acres in the Oswegatchie Hills is good news for the preservation of this beautiful Niantic River estuary. The Hills are a unique geographical asset that cannot be replaced and deserve to be kept as pristine as possible to protect the river and the unusual character of the terrain.

Friends of the Oswegatchie Hills Nature Preserve intend to buy the property from Alan Gardiner of Waterford, who, like the buyer, has an interest in saving this beautiful area. If this parcel can be protected, it will add substantially to the 130 acres in trust there under the East Lyme Land Conservation Trust. The trust has received gifts of 118 acres from George Mitchell and 14 acres from Norman Peck Sr., both of East Lyme. The group also is seeking additional lands for the trust.

There is a third conservation group, called Save the River, Save the Hills, led by Fred Grimsey of Waterford.

All these groups should be cooperating and speaking in a common voice about preserving the Hills and the Niantic River.

In the same fashion that the Lower Connecticut River valley deserves aggressive conservation management, so, too, do the Oswegatchie Hills and the Niantic River. The notion that those who are opposed to housing there are guilty of trying to shut out low-income residents is pure fiction. People in the region are rallying to the cry to save the Oswegatchie Hills because that is the right thing to do. Since when did development of unique natural areas for housing become a sensible policy?

Too many Eastern mountains have been scarred by excessive ski development in the same fashion that McMansions have ruined the scenery along the banks of many great rivers in Idaho, Montana, Colorado and Wyoming. Take a ride outside Denver to see what obtrusive home development can do to pristine foothills.

In Southeastern Connecticut, the region has the opportunity to do better. Smart growth means putting housing and commercial development where they make sense and fit the terrain. Saving for posterity those areas unique to a region or state is just common sense. It amounts to saving people's heritage. This is very important when dealing with the beautiful river and stream valleys in Eastern Connecticut that are particularly sensitive to environmental degradation.

East Lyme has a conspicuous local example of development run amok where it should have been planned better, smaller and more intelligently. That is the Latimer Brook valley along Route 161 in Flanders. Bad planning decisions have created a mess from just south of Silver Falls on the north, through the meadows and woods where houses were located too close to the stream banks and flooding regularly occurs, to the Flanders Four Corners. A gravel bank operation coupled with the housing led to severe silting near Interstate 95 and into the cove at Golden Spur.

East Lyme managed to plop down shopping and office centers on top of Latimer Brook at the Flanders Four Corners in a conspicuous disregard for the laws of nature and the vulnerability of wetlands. Intelligent planning ought to place needed commerce where it makes sense and not where it will cause a heavy cost to the environment.

Heightened by the past mistakes, a growing chorus of residents and town officials in Waterford and East Lyme has raised their voices in opposition to developing the Oswegatchie Hills. Their concern is genuine

and their cause is just.

Preserving the Oswegatchie Hills ought to be a priority for the region and the state.